

Communications Fact Sheet

Public perceptions about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs play a significant role in the use of these substances. Famous actors are photographed holding cigarettes or lately, cigars, while many rock stars glamorize drug and alcohol use—glamorization of, for example, smoking has been linked to an increase in youth tobacco use. Policies restricting tobacco and alcohol advertising can begin to reduce the flood of positive portrayals of substance use that assaults us. Lobbying groups and other collaborative efforts can encourage the television and film industries to limit their portrayals of drinking, smoking heroes.

Communication strategies are more likely to be effective if they do one or more of the following:

- Reach many people in the community
- Present messages that appeal to the motives of young people for using substances, or refute their perceptions of substance abuse
- Place messages where young people are likely to see and hear them
- Tailor messages to the particular audience
- Avoid the use of authority figures and admonishments, as well as the demonstration of harmful substances

Four types of communications activities can help educate the public about the real dangers of substance abuse:

- *Public education* campaigns attempt to increase knowledge and awareness of a particular health issue. A campaign can communicate information about personal risk factors, or publicize new laws or programs that promote protective behaviors. Campaigns can target a wide range of people, including youth, parents, teachers, and others involved in the lives of youth.
- *Social marketing* campaigns apply techniques that have been successful in the field of commercial advertising to advance social and public health causes. These campaigns try to convince the public to adopt a new behavior (such as wearing seat belts or using condoms) by showing them the benefit they will receive in return (e.g., protection in a car accident, or avoidance of an unwanted pregnancy or STD).
- *Media advocacy* activities employ mass media to advance a public policy initiative or message, frame the debate, and build support for changes in public policy. By working directly with local newspapers, television and cable channels, and radio stations, media advocates try to impact the way people talk and think about a social or public policy initiative.
- *Media literacy* programs teach young people to analyze and understand media messages, and empower them to make decisions independent of the media's overwhelming influence. Young people learn how programs and advertisements are developed, and what strategies producers use to make media messages more persuasive.

Communications Illustration

Partnership Counters Pro-Alcohol Messages Associated with the Mexican Holiday Cinco de Mayo¹⁴

CalPartners, a California partnership of community substance abuse prevention organizations, began a campaign in 1998 to counter pro-alcohol messages and to promote the true meaning of the Mexican holiday Cinco de Mayo, a family holiday of remembrance. The campaign began with a list of goals:

- Promote alcohol- and tobacco-free Cinco de Mayo celebrations.
- Replace alcohol and tobacco sponsors of holiday events with other sponsors.
- Encourage responsible service of alcoholic beverages at the celebrations where alcohol is served, and encourage abstinence or moderate consumption among participants.
- Meet with alcohol and tobacco distributors and retailers to encourage them to market responsibly during Cinco de Mayo and not to market it as a drinking holiday.
- Foster general awareness of the true meaning and family nature of Cinco de Mayo.
- Hold public protests of celebrations and advertisements that demean Mexican symbols and Latinos.
- Send letters to and request meetings with event organizers, distributors, retailers, and advertising outlets (such as newspapers, and radio and TV stations), asking them not to sell products that are marketed in an objectionable way, or to market products that way themselves.
- Seek sponsorships for alternative, alcohol-free events.
- Ask local beverage control representatives or local authorities to decline licenses for celebrations with records of past problems due to alcohol availability.
- Communicate with community, health, and business reporters at TV and radio stations and local newspapers about the mission.
- Hold public events that praise supporters.
- Promote safe and positive celebrations.
- Protest celebrations and advertisements that are objectionable.
- Volunteer to help police departments administer and monitor responsible beverage service at celebrations serving alcohol, and to promote awareness among attendees.

To achieve its goals, CalPartners designed an action plan that listed activities people could take part in as individuals or members of community agencies or larger collaborations. Among their suggestions:

- Hold a kick-off press event.
- Secure endorsements from elected officials, the faith community, ethnic and health groups, and other local organizations.

CalPartners actively distributes information to help people join its campaign, including a brief history of the true meaning of Cinco de Mayo, and research on the effects of alcohol on Latinos.